Whycocomagh School Recommended; Board Decisions Stand

Department of Education

News Releases

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Education Minister Jane Purves will seek cabinet approval for a new school for Whycocomagh. However, the Strait regional school board's decisions to transfer Whycocomagh high school students and Judique-Creignish Primary to Grade 12 students to neighbouring schools will not be overturned.

The minister will recommend that a new Primary to Grade 8 Whycocomagh Consolidated be given an environmental focus. Community use of the school will be promoted, so the school remains an educational resource in the heart of Whycocomagh.

"We have elected school boards in place to make decisions about their schools," Ms. Purves said. "The sad fact is the student numbers aren't there, and the situation is only getting worse. If we force school boards to keep old buildings open, how will they have the money to provide teachers, textbooks and other classroom needs?"

Over the past 10 years, enrolments across the Strait region have dropped to about 10,000 students from about 14,000. By 2010, enrolments are expected to dip to about 7,000. Based on these projected declines, the board will lose almost $19 million -- or 30 per cent of funding -- by 2010.

This trend is mirrored in Inverness County. Enrolments have dropped to 3,400 from about 4,500 in the past 10 years, and are expected to drop to about 2,050 in 10 years' time.

Ms. Purves said the parents she met with made moving presentations. "These parents have a right to be proud of the education their children have received in the past," she said. "I wish I had a different answer. Unfortunately, fewer and fewer students mean fewer and fewer dollars -- and the quality offered in the past cannot be sustained in the future."

"We have to look beyond the buildings, at what can be offered in the classroom," the minister said. "That's what the board is trying to do."

Within new schools, the board can offer more programs, with specialist teachers, such as those available in other parts of the province. The board plans to eliminate multi-grading, so teachers have more time to spend on the individual needs of students. Comprehensive guidance, special education, fine arts, and other important programs -- delivered in modern labs, libraries and learning areas -- will also be available.

Before reaching her decision, the minister looked at how the board is spending its money. Over the past three years, the board has cut administration by 33 per cent. Despite fewer dollars, it has increased services in special education by almost 19 per cent, and funding to support classrooms is also up slightly. Property services costs can only be reduced if buildings close, freeing up dollars to support classrooms.

The decision to seek approval for a new school in Whycocomagh, instead of renovations, is based on a facility assessment by the Department of Public Works. This assessment determined that the deteriorating condition of the building makes construction a more cost-effective option than renovations.

FOR BROADCAST USE:

Nova Scotia Education Minister Jane Purves will seek cabinet approval for a new school for Whycocomagh.

Meanwhile, the minister has confirmed decisions made by the Strait regional school board to transfer Whycocomagh high school students and Primary-to-12 Judique-Creignish students to neighbouring schools -- those transfers will go ahead.

Purves says she'll recommend an environmental focus for the new Whycocomagh school.

The minister says the decision to close schools has been difficult for the board, but declining enrolment leaves no other choice.

Purves praises the efforts of parents who spoke of the pride they felt for the education their children received in the past.

She says declining enrolment translates to fewer dollars and difficulty in continuing to offer quality education into the future.

New schools will mean more programs with specialist

teachers, the elimination of multi-grade classrooms, and

more time to spend on individual student needs.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: A **fact sheet** on issues facing the Strait regional school board is available by e-mailing release@gov.ns.ca or calling 902-424-4492.

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